

Bird Track Springs Fish Enhancement Project

RECREATION

Specialist Report

Prepared by:

Andy Steele

La Grande Recreation Specialist

Wallowa-Whitman National Forest

November 1, 2016

/s/ Andy Steele

Introduction

This interdisciplinary team specialist report for the Bird Track Springs Fish Project (Bird Track) will cover the recreation activities related to: dispersed recreation, developed sites, trails, and recreational permitted uses.

Overview of Resource

The majority of the recreation use in the Bird Track project area occurs at the Bird Track Springs Interpretive Trail. There is limited developed or dispersed recreation within the project area outside of this site. The La Grande Rifle and Pistol club operates a shooting range within the project area on USFS lands under a Special Use Permit.

The Wallowa-Whitman National Forest developed a recreation program niche which reflects its defining or unique characteristics and abilities (WWNF, 2006). To define these characteristics, the niche focuses on recreation setting descriptions and emphasis, site function, key activities, site types and capacity. The Bird Track project area is within the 'Blue Mountains' setting. The three settings for the forest were delineated based on large geographic areas with elements of landscape characteristics, common management themes, similar recreation activities and site developments. The 'Wallowa Mountains' is characterized as - *a mixture of backcountry roads and trails transitioning into wilderness*. This designation is a mid-range recreation setting set between the 'Hells Canyon' setting (a combination of river corridors, scenic byways, viewpoints, and access into upland areas/wilderness, and cultural sites), and 'Blue Mountains' setting (more traditional uses along forest routes transitioning into the backcountry). Major activities identified in the 'Blue Mountains' setting include; family camping, hunting, hiking, fishing, winter sports/snowmobiling, gathering forest products (firewood, mushrooms), Interpretation & Education, driving for pleasure and OHV use on designated routes.

Issues Addressed

No recreation issues were identified during public or internal scoping.

Forest Plan Direction

Since the construction of new recreation facilities is proposed for Bird Track, this report focuses on the river restoration and its effect on the recreation setting and visitor opportunities.

In reviewing the 1990 Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) (WWNF, 1990), the goal for the Recreation resource is to “...provide a wide variety of recreation opportunities in an attractive setting, and make those opportunities available to all segments of society”.

Existing Condition

Recreation Activities

Although no specific recreation use studies were completed for Bird Track, inferences can be made to the typical types of activities that occur in the project area based on a national recreation survey. In 2014 the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest (WWNF) conducted the National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) (WWNF, 2016) survey to gather information about recreation visitor satisfaction, activities and use levels. One product of the survey revealed the primary and overall participation levels for various activities.

Table 3. Participation in WWNF Recreational Activities (top 10 only)

Top activities on the WWNF	Percent of visitors who participated in this activity	Percent of visitors who participated in this as primary activity
Relaxing	48.3	10.5
Viewing Natural Features	46.8	8.7
Viewing Wildlife	46.3	4.5

Top activities on the WWNF	Percent of visitors who participated in this activity	Percent of visitors who participated in this as primary activity
Hiking/Walking	43.7	10.5
Driving for Pleasure	26.5	3.2
Picnicking	18.4	2.4
Fishing	17.3	7.6
Visiting Historic Sites	15.4	0.2
Gathering Forest Products	14.7	10.5
Developed Camping	13.1	2.6

Some of the least participated activities which occur on the WWNF are; motorized trail activity (2.8%), resort use (2.3%), Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) use (2.1%), and snowmobiling (1.2%),

The highest percent of survey respondents were from; within 0-25 miles of the forest (26.9%), within 26-50 miles of the forest (19.6%), within 101-200 miles of the forest (17.2%), and within 201-500 miles of the forest (14.4%). A total of 6.4% of visitors travelled to the forest from greater than 500 miles away. During their time on the forest, visitors spent an average 3.1 hours at developed recreation sites, 46.0 hours at overnight sites, 34.8 hours in designated Wilderness, and 11.3 hours in undesignated areas.

Although inferences can be made from NVUM survey or from local manager's observations about the types of uses that occur in Bird Track, no specific information is available to better understand why visitors come to this area. One reason for visitation to an area may be linked to a visitors 'sense of place'. Sense of place is the human connection to a place, and may involve meanings and values that facilitate intimate connections with particular geographical area (Farnum, et al., 2005). This is an individual's attachment to a place based on both internal (i.e. emotional, personal, social, cultural, activity) and external factors (i.e. scenic, aesthetic, landscape). It also varies between local residents who often feel that they have a unique, special, privileged sense of place, and tourists or regular visitors who also have strong attachments to places. Since this is an individual's 'human connection' to a place, it is anticipated that a variety of comments and reactions to management proposals will be received. However managers face a challenge in that there will be multiple senses of place and a variety of possibly conflicting meanings and attachments amongst users.

Dispersed Recreation

Visitors participating in dispersed recreation activities do not primarily use or rely upon developed sites such as campgrounds, or picnic areas to conduct their activity. However they may use a developed site to *support* their activity, such as parking at a trailhead or getting drinking water from a campground, but their main time is spent away from the developed sites. All of the activities listed in Table R3 (except developed camping) could be viewed as dispersed recreation activities. Other dispersed activities like OHV use, snowmobiling, horseback riding, and cross country skiing, are rarely pursued in the limited geographic area of Bird Track.

As shown in Table 3 above, other types of dispersed recreation occur year-round. Visitors enjoying these recreational pursuits may use forest roads as transportation networks (i.e. OHV riders, snowmobile riders, cross-country skiers, driving for pleasure, viewing wildlife), or just travel cross country away from roads and trails (i.e. hunters, viewing nature, fishing, hiking or walking). Recreationists who pursue dispersed activities often do so for a combination of desires to; be away from crowds, seek solitude, enjoy nature (scenery, geology, wildlife) and cultural sites, seek challenges or adventure, or wanting to be more self-reliant.

Developed Recreation Sites

The Bird Track Springs Campground, though not technically within the planning area, is immediately adjacent to the Interpretive Trail system on Highway 244. It receives moderate to heavy use from May-September each year.

Developed Trails

There is only one developed trail system located within the Bird Track project area. The Bird Track Springs Interpretive Trail is a network of flat walking paths between Highway 244 and the Grande Ronde River at the western (upstream) limit of the project. These trails are primarily used by birdwatchers and walkers who wish to explore an easily accessible riparian area. Though initially designed to incorporate some interpretive elements, the full educational and interpretive potential of these trails is not fully realized. Post-project redesigns of the trail system and site-specific interpretation would complement the purpose of the Bird Track project.

Table 4. Developed Trails within the Bird Track Project Area

Trail Name and Number	Miles in Project
Bird Track Springs (1940)	0.74
Bird Track Springs Spur A (1940A)	0.14
Bird Track Springs Spur B (1940B)	0.21
Bird Track Springs Connector C (1940C)	0.02
Bird Track Springs Connector D (1940D)	0.01
Bird Track Springs Spur E (1940E)	0.004
<i>Project Area Totals =</i>	1.124 miles

Permitted Uses

Some recreational activities are managed under permits which allow recreationists or operators to do certain activities under the terms of the permits. These permits include; gathering firewood, gathering forest products like mushrooms, hunting and recreation special use activities. Use of these permits can be considered 'recreational' since visitors often participate in them for primary or secondary forms of enjoyment.

Annually the WWNF sells over 2500 of personal use firewood permits and over 1900 forest product permits like mushroom and Christmas tree tags. Each permit has terms and conditions which guide uses and locations for the activities. Although no data is available for how many permits are used in Bird Track, these activities can generally occur in most areas outside of riparian areas, old growth area, tree plantations, and other special designated location described on the permits.

The La Grande Rifle and Pistol Club uses and maintains a target range within the Bird Track project area under a Special Use Permit. The permitted area is comprised of 99.8 acres in T3S R36E S11 and 14.

Environmental Consequences

Methods

The method of analysis included:

- A review of the appropriate Forest Service policy and goals, objectives and standards of the Forest Plan

- Project site visits
- A review of Forest-level recreation use surveys
- A review of the USDA Forest Service literature related to recreation management (i.e. sense of place)
- Data base queries for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest GIS data base queries (i.e. dispersed recreation points, developed recreation points, management areas)
- Data base queries for the USDA Forest Service I-web data base

The existing condition was compared with possible changes to recreation use if alternatives were implemented.

Spatial and Temporal Context for Effects Analysis

The environmental effects will be discussed in different timeframes. For direct and indirect effects, a short term effect for recreational visitors is viewed as occurring within two years (or 2 visitation seasons from the beginning of the implementation activity (i.e. harvest and storage of large wood materials, instream work, and post-project rehabilitation efforts). Long term is viewed as a period of time ranging from two to ten years after completing the implementation activity (i.e. post-project restoration activities such as planting and subsoiling are done).

Direct and Indirection Effects to Recreation

Alternative 1 – No Action

There would be no direct or indirect effects under Alternative 1. Vegetation densities or characteristics would not be modified, and the forest would continue to be influenced by natural processes and limited management actions, such as fire suppression. Since no implementation activities would result under this alternative, no change is anticipated in the number of visitors, frequency or season of use in dispersed recreation activities, developed recreation sites, trails, or permitted uses. Recreational visits within the project area would remain near the same levels as previous years and under this alternative traditional use patterns and recreational opportunities would not be impacted. Hunting, hiking and other dispersed recreation and permitted uses access and opportunities are expected to remain unchanged.

Alternative 2

Dispersed Recreation – Dispersed recreation activities would be affected by the project activities. In the short term, users may be discouraged from entering the project area due to the presence of equipment and workers. This may occur at any time of year, as Bird Track is a relatively low-elevation site and does receive light winter visitation. Downed trees, slash piles, and loss of forest-products (i.e. mushrooms, berries) may also discourage visitor use in an area. Noise and other disturbances may affect the quality of the recreation experience for an individual regardless of the proximity to the activity.

A change in natural features or landscape characteristics may elicit different responses in visitors. As discussed above one attraction to an area may be linked to visitors ‘sense of place’ (Farnum, et al., 2005). A visitor’s sense of place includes attachments to external factors like natural features or landscape characteristics. Important landscape features may consist of large old growth trees and groves, variety of trees species, an open or closed tree canopy, rock formations, water bodies, and natural appearing openings (USDA-FS, 1995). The proposed treatments of altering the course of the Grande Ronde River would change or remove some of these natural features. In some cases the changing landscape would displace or discourage certain types of dispersed recreational activities in the short term (i.e. studying nature, viewing wildlife).

Developed Recreation – Because of Bird Track’s small geographic size, effects to developed and dispersed recreation are similar. Access to developed sites may be delayed or restricted during equipment staging or construction periods. The presence of large trucks and other equipment on Highway 244 may

discourage users from driving the main access route to developed sites or other associated activities outside of the developed recreation area. The noise, dust, and equipment activity during project activities may affect the quality of the recreation experience for a visitor regardless of the proximity to the activity. The frequency and intensity of these activities may vary from a few hours to several weeks or months. Some loss or change of vistas, scenery, natural features or wildlife viewing opportunities may result with the vegetation treatments visible from the developed sites.

Developed Trails – Due to the proposed realignment of the Grande Ronde River, there would be a direct effect to the Bird Track Springs Interpretive Trail system during this project. The proposed new river channel would lie significantly closer to Highway 244 than the existing river; thus, the vast majority of the existing trail system would either be obliterated during project work or would be inaccessible on the far bank of the post-project riverbed. The USFS proposes for a new trail system (See Appendix A) to be constructed along the south bank of the river after Phase 1 realignment is complete. This new trail system, as proposed, would include updated site-specific interpretation and would repurpose the equipment staging site as a new off-highway parking area. The proposed trail rebuild would be approximately one (1) mile in length, a loss of approximately 0.1 mile from the current system total. There may be a post-project period one year or longer where there is not a functional trail system at Bird Track Springs.

Permitted Uses – All permitted uses are authorized under the term and conditions of a permit which allow activities not available to a non-permitted user. Most of these uses are intrinsically tied to road access, and the removal of forest products is dependent upon specific areas or vegetation. Permitted uses would be affected by the project activities mentioned above. Depending on the intensity of activity near the river, permit users may be displaced to other areas inside or outside Bird Track. Increased obstacles like downed trees and slash piles, or loss of forest-products (i.e. mushrooms, berries) would also change harvest patterns. Residual dust, noise, and equipment activity is also not conducive to a quality recreation experience.

Irreversible and Irretrievable Commitments of Resources

There are no irreversible and irretrievable commitments to the recreation resource associated with any of the alternatives analyzed. The number, available types and use capacity for developed, dispersed and trail recreation activities would not be changed by the project proposal.